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Press Release

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West Nile Virus May Have Contributed to Deaths of Two Elderly Idahoans

West Nile virus may have contributed to the deaths of two elderly Idaho residents. A man from Elmore County and a woman from Lincoln County, both over the age of 70, died recently after contracting West Nile infection.

“West Nile virus can infect all ages, but may lead to more serious illness in people over the age of 50,” says Dr. Leslie Tengelsen, deputy state epidemiologist. “Everyone should fight the bite of mosquitoes to avoid infection.”

Over 50 Idaho residents have tested positive for West Nile infection in 2006, with six of those reported with neuroinvasive disease, a serious form of the illness. So far this year, 17 Idaho counties have reported West Nile activity. Until recently, most of the activity had occurred in southwest and south-central Idaho counties. Over the last week, the virus has spread to new areas in eastern Idaho with the counties of Bannock, Bear Lake, Bingham and Fremont reporting evidence of West Nile virus activity.

West Nile virus was first discovered in 1999 in New York and has gradually spread across the United States. Idaho started experiencing significant local transmission of the virus in 2004. “Just like the rest of the nation, West Nile has become part of our ecosystem,” Tengelsen says. “If you see mosquitoes, you should consider that they may carry West Nile and take precautions to avoid their bite.” She says people across southern Idaho should consider West Nile to be as close as the mosquitoes in their backyards.

(more)

To protect themselves from mosquito bites, she advises people to:

- Apply insect repellent approved by the EPA to exposed skin and clothing. Follow instructions on the product label, especially for children;
- Insect-proof their homes by repairing or replacing screens;
- Reduce standing water on their property that provides mosquito breeding habitat, such as bird baths and decorative ponds;
- Cover up exposed skin when outdoors by wearing long-pants and long-sleeved shirts;
- Avoid mosquitoes when they are most active at dawn and dusk; and
- Report dead birds to your local Fish and Game office.

West Nile virus does not appear to affect most animals including dogs and cats to any significant degree, but can cause severe illness in horses and certain species of birds. Although there is not a vaccine available for people, there are several vaccines for horses. Approximately one-third of horses which contract West Nile virus will die, so horse owners are encouraged to contact their veterinarian about vaccinating their animals. Horse owners who suspect West Nile viral infection in their animal should contact their veterinarian immediately.

Additional information about the virus is available from the Department of Health and Welfare's web site at <http://www.westnile.idaho.gov> where information on cases in Idaho is updated weekly. The Idaho State Department of Agriculture's Urban Pest Management program also has information available on steps to prevent home-grown mosquito infestations. This information is available on ISDA's web site at <http://www.idahoag.us>.

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(Editors: For more information, please contact IDHW's Tom Shanahan at 334-0668, or your District Health Department Public Information Officer.)